



US009070525B2

(12) **United States Patent**
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(10) **Patent No.:** **US 9,070,525 B2**
(45) **Date of Patent:** **Jun. 30, 2015**

(54) **ELECTROMAGNETIC SWITCH FOR STARTER**

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(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 0 days.

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(21) Appl. No.: **14/134,495**

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JP	A-2006-177160	7/2006

(22) Filed: **Dec. 19, 2013**

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(65) **Prior Publication Data**

US 2014/0176267 A1 Jun. 26, 2014

Feb. 26, 2015 Search Report issued in French Application No. FR1363057.

(30) **Foreign Application Priority Data**

Dec. 20, 2012 (JP) 2012-277909

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

(51) **Int. Cl.**

H01H 67/02 (2006.01)

H01H 50/54 (2006.01)

H01H 50/12 (2006.01)

H01H 51/06 (2006.01)

H01H 50/02 (2006.01)

H01H 9/04 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.**

CPC **H01H 50/54** (2013.01); **H01H 50/023** (2013.01); **H01H 50/12** (2013.01); **H01H 51/065** (2013.01); **H01H 9/047** (2013.01); **H01H 50/546** (2013.01)

(58) **Field of Classification Search**

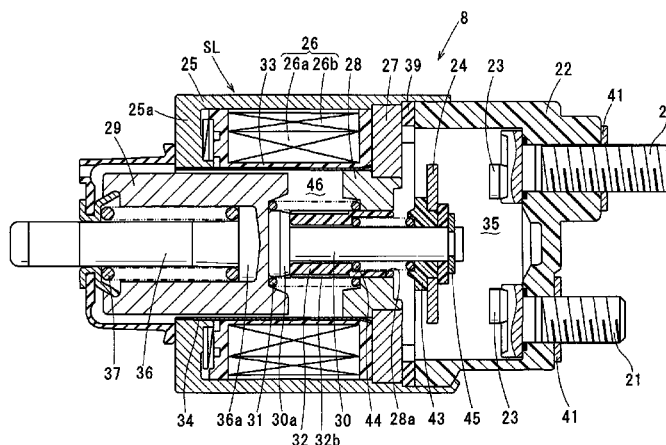
CPC H01H 1/00; H01H 45/00; H01H 51/06

USPC 335/126

See application file for complete search history.

An electromagnetic switch for a starter. The electromagnetic switch includes a cylindrical slidable member that is separate from a plunger, loosely encompasses an outer circumferential periphery of a plunger rod, and is axially movable integrally with the plunger. The slidable member is at least partially axially inserted into an inner circumferential periphery of a cylindrical bore. The slidable member has a sliding surface such that, when the solenoid is in its inactive state, the sliding surface is entirely circumferentially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore, and has a vent groove axially extending on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member such that, when the solenoid is in its active state, a plunger compartment and the contact compartment are in fluid communication with each other via the vent groove.

10 Claims, 6 Drawing Sheets



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FIG. 1

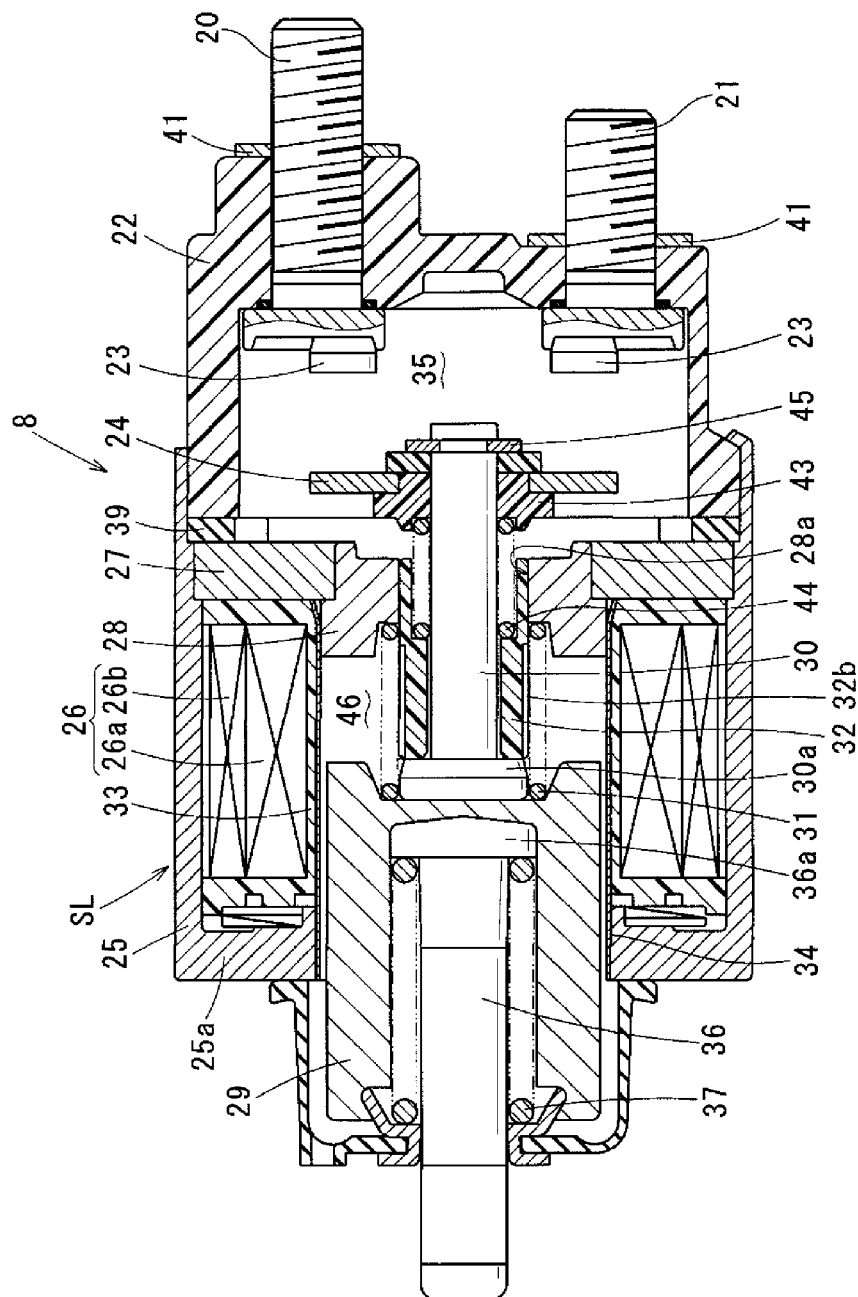


FIG. 2A

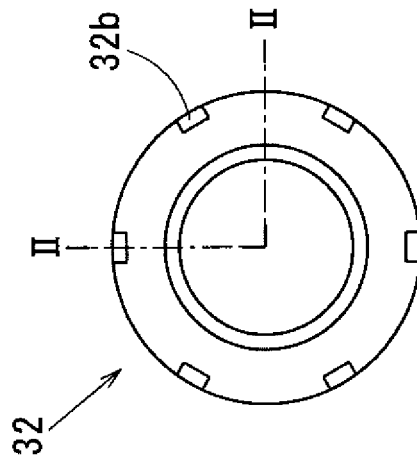


FIG. 2B

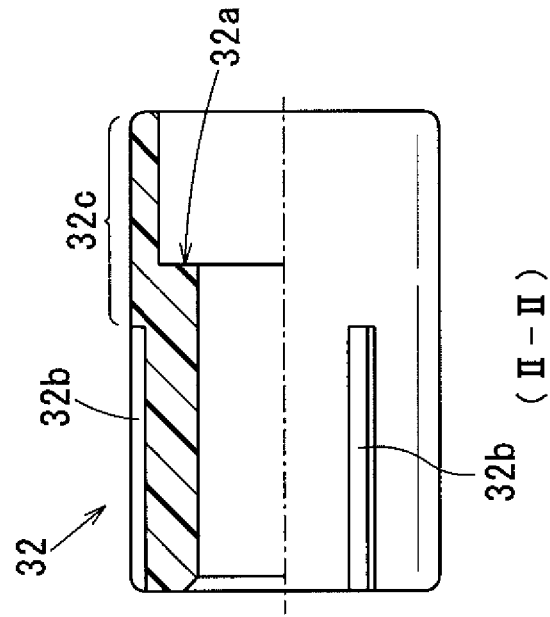


FIG. 3

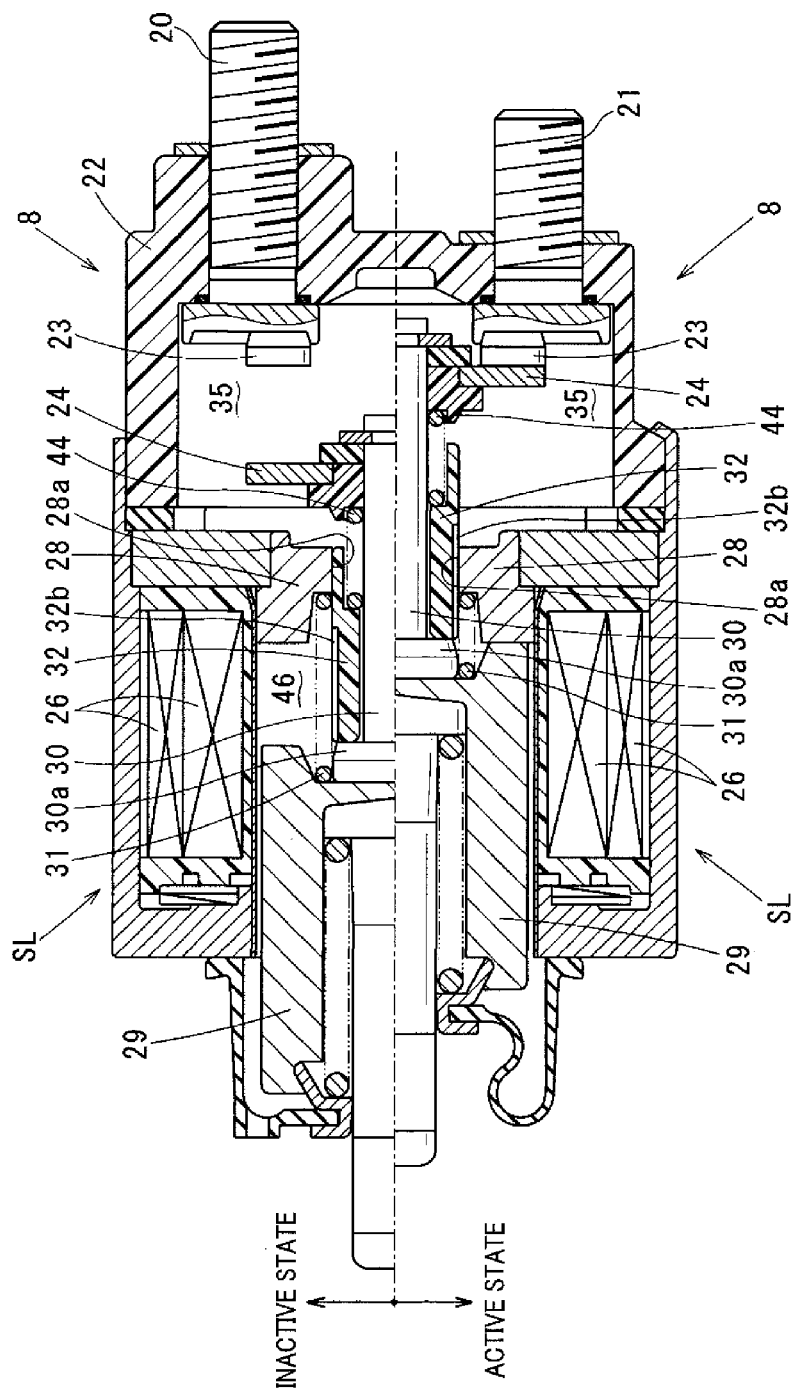


FIG. 4

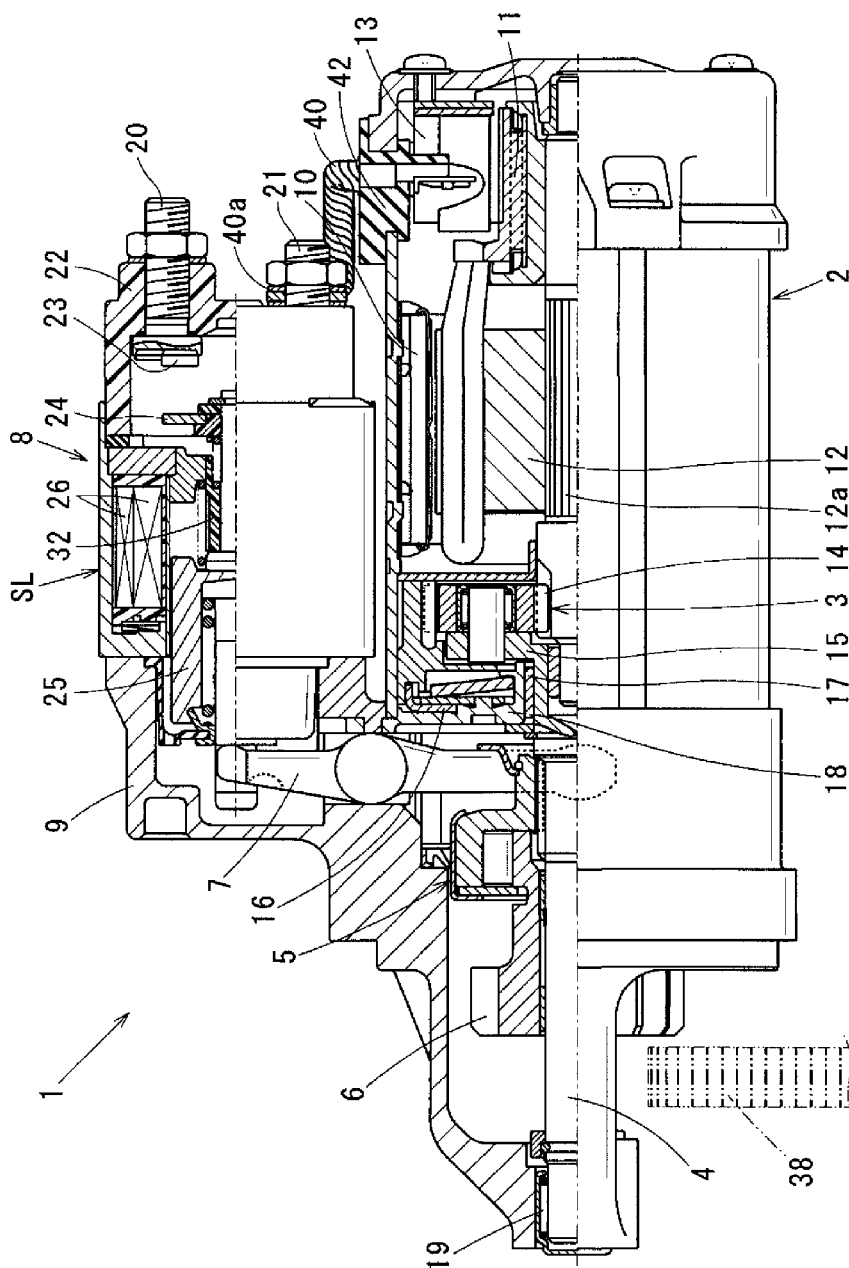


FIG. 5
PRIOR ART

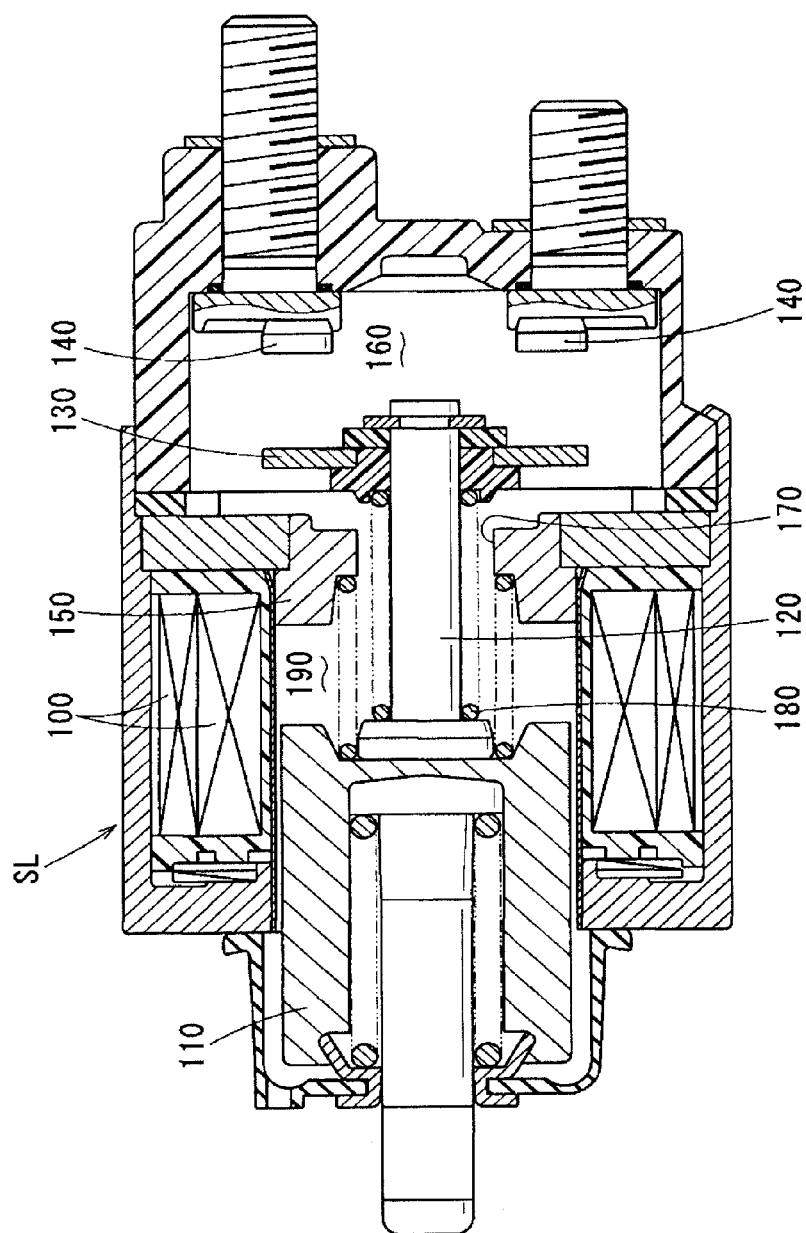
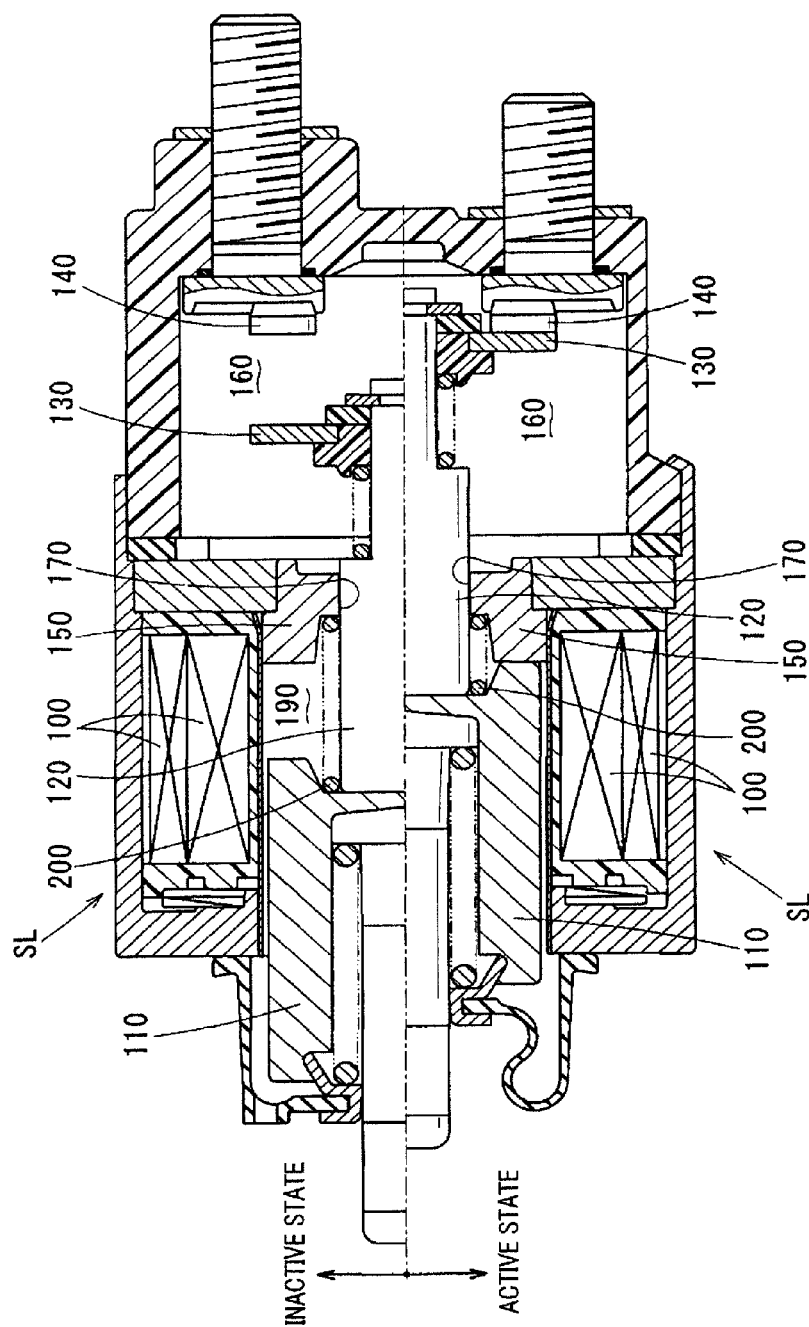


FIG. 6
PRIOR ART



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ELECTROMAGNETIC SWITCH FOR STARTER

CROSS-REFERENCE TO RELATED APPLICATION

This application is based on and claims the benefit of priority from earlier Japanese Patent Applications No. 2012-277909 filed Dec. 20, 2012, the descriptions of which are incorporated herein by reference.

BACKGROUND

1. Technical Field

The present invention relates to a starter electromagnetic switch for opening and closing a main contact provided on a starter motor circuit to thereby switch on and off motor energization current.

2. Related Art

A known starter electromagnetic switch, as disclosed in Japanese Patent Application Laid-Open Publication No. 2006-177160, includes, as shown in FIG. 5, a solenoid SL configured to form an electromagnet through energization of a coil 100 to drive a plunger 110 by means of an attractive force of the electromagnet, and a movable contact 130 attached to an end of a plunger rod 120 secured to the plunger 110. The movable contact 130 is arranged in opposition to a pair of fixed contacts 140 electrically connected to a starter motor circuit. The movable contact 130 moves in the axial direction of the plunger 110 integrally therewith in response to ON/OFF operation of the solenoid SL (i.e., excited/unexcited state of the coil 100) to thereby electrically connect and disconnect the pair of fixed contacts 140.

The electromagnetic switch disclosed in Japanese Patent Application Laid-Open Publication No. 2006-177160 includes a contact compartment 160 on the anti-plunger side of a fixed iron core 150 to be magnetized by the electromagnet, in which compartment the pair of fixed contacts 140 and the movable contact 130 are arranged. More specifically, the fixed iron core 150 has a cylindrical bore 170 located radially centrally therein. The plunger rod 120 extends through the bore 170, and the end portion of the plunger rod 120 resides in the contact compartment 160. In addition, a contact pressure spring 180 is provided on the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 120 to bias the movable contact 130. To install the contact pressure spring 180 inside the inner diameter of the bore 170 without interference with the fixed iron core 150, the inner diameter of the bore 170 is set greater than the outer diameter of the contact pressure spring 180. In the above configuration, however, a spatial gap between the inner diameter of the cylindrical bore 170 in the fixed iron core 150 and the outer diameter of the plunger rod 120 may lead to fluid communication between a plunger movement space 190 in which the plunger 110 can axially move (hereinafter referred to as a plunger compartment) and the contact compartment 160, so that moisture is prone to intrude from the plunger compartment 190 into the contact compartment 160.

Additionally, as shown in FIG. 6, a step is provided on the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger 120 such that the plunger rod 120 is formed of a thick portion on the plunger side and a thin portion on the anti-plunger side along the axial direction and the outer circumferential periphery of the thick portion of the plunger rod 120 is in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 170. In this configuration, there is substantially no spatial gap between the outer circumferential periphery of the thick portion of the plunger rod 120 and the inner circumferential

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periphery of the cylindrical bore 170, which can prevent moisture from intruding from the plunger compartment 190 into the contact compartment 160 during transition from an inactive state (in which the solenoid is OFF) to an active state (in which the solenoid is ON).

During transition from the active state to the inactive state, however, the plunger 110 will be pushed back to the left (as viewed in the drawings) by a restoring force of the return spring 200, which may cause a substantial negative pressure to be produced in the contact compartment 160.

In the presence of moisture in the plunger compartment 190 (e.g., on a surface of the plunger 110 or on an outer peripheral surface of the plunger rod 120), the negative pressure produced in the contact compartment 160 may cause the moisture to be sucked from the plunger compartment 190 into the contact compartment 160. Hence, for example, when the outside temperature falls below freezing, the moisture sucked into the contact compartment 160 may freeze to contact surfaces of the fixed contacts 140 and/or the movable contact 130. This may lead to conduction defects between these contacts during operation of the electromagnetic switch. To prevent such conduction defects, ice produced on the contact surfaces has to be broken by contact bombardment upon contact of the movable contact 130 with the fixed contacts 140, which requires increasing the attractive force of the solenoid to thereby enhance the contact bombardment upon contact.

Further, in the electromagnetic switch as shown in FIG. 6, the presence of two slidable contact portions, i.e., a slidable contact portion of an outer circumferential periphery of the plunger 110 and a slidable contact portion of an outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 120, may cause prying of the plunger 110 and the plunger rod 120 upon activation of the solenoid SL when the plunger 110 and the plunger rod 120 are off-center from each other. Such prying of the plunger 110 and the plunger rod 120 may increase slidable resistance during the plunger being attracted, which may lead to conduction defects between the fixed contacts 140 and/or the movable contact 130. Normal operation of the electromagnetic switch even in the presence of increased slidable resistance due to prying of the plunger and the plunger rod requires the attractive force of the solenoid SL to be increased.

Conventionally, increasing the attractive force of the solenoid SL may lead to a disadvantage that an outer diameter and weight of the electromagnetic switch will be increased.

In consideration of the foregoing, it would therefore be desirable to have a starter electromagnetic switch capable of minimizing intrusion of moisture from a plunger compartment into a contact compartment to reduce an attractive force of a solenoid and thereby reduce both size and weight of the switch.

SUMMARY

In accordance with an exemplary embodiment of the present invention, there is provided an electromagnetic switch for a starter, including: a main contact provided on a motor circuit for the starter and configured to interrupt energization current to a motor; and a solenoid configured to open and close the main contact in response to ON/OFF operation of an electromagnet. The solenoid includes: a coil configured to form the electromagnet through energization; a plunger movable axially on an inner circumferential periphery of the coil; a fixed iron core disposed on an axial side of the plunger and having a cylindrical bore that is a through-hole passing through the fixed iron core axially in its radial center, the fixed iron core being configured to be magnetized by the electro-

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magnet; and a plunger rod extending axially through an inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore and having an axial plunger side end portion secured to the plunger so as to be movable integrally with the plunger.

The main contact includes: a pair of fixed contacts disposed in a contact compartment formed on an axial anti-plunger side of the fixed iron core, the pair of fixed contacts being electrically connected to the motor circuit; and a movable contact attached to an axial anti-plunger side end portion of the plunger rod passing through the cylindrical bore and projecting into the contact compartment, the movable contact being axially movable integrally with the plunger so as to electrically connect and disconnect the pair of fixed contacts, thereby turning on and off the motor circuit.

The electromagnetic switch further includes a cylindrical slidable member that is separate from the plunger, loosely encompasses an outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod, and is axially movable integrally with the plunger, the slidable member being at least partially axially inserted into the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore whether the solenoid is in its active or inactive state. The slidable member further includes a sliding surface that is a portion of an outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member such that, when the solenoid is in its inactive state, the sliding surface is entirely circumferentially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore, and the slidable member further having a vent groove axially extending on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member such that, when the solenoid is in its active state, a plunger compartment, in which the plunger is axially movable inside an inner circumferential periphery of the coil, and the contact compartment is in fluid communication with each other via the vent groove.

With this configuration, when the solenoid is in its inactive state, the slidable surface of the slidable member is inserted into the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore and the slidable surface of the slidable member is entirely circumferentially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore. Hence, there is substantially no clearance between the outer circumferential periphery of the sliding surface of the slidable member and the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore, which provides hermeticity between the plunger compartment and the contact compartment. This can minimize intrusion of moisture from the plunger compartment into the contact compartment.

Meanwhile, when the solenoid is in its active state, the sliding surface of the slidable member moves axially out of the cylindrical bore to reach into the contact compartment, so that the plunger compartment (an inner space of the solenoid in which the plunger is axially movable) and the contact compartment is in fluid communication with each other via the vent groove provided on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member. This can minimize a negative pressure produced in the contact compartment when the plunger is pushed back in the anti-fixed-iron-core direction upon transition from the active state to the inactive state of the solenoid. Accordingly, there will occur substantially no moisture intrusion into the contact compartment, which may prevent generation of ice on the contact surface. Even if a little moisture that has intruded from the plunger compartment into the contact compartment freezes to contact faces of the fixed contacts and/or the movable contact, a film of ice will not grow. This allows attractive forces of the solenoid required to break the ice on the contact faces of the fixed contacts and/or the movable contact to be reduced.

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In the electromagnetic switch as configured above, the presence of sliding contact portions of the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger and the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member may cause the plunger and the slidable member to be off-center from each other when the solenoid is in its active state. To this, the slidable member loosely encompasses the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod, is separate from the plunger. Hence, even when the plunger and the slidable member are off-center from each other, the slidable member is radially movable with radial play. This can prevent prying of the plunger and the plunger rod due to the plunger and the slidable member being off-center from each other, thereby preventing increase of sliding resistance.

Since attractive forces of the solenoid can be reduced as compared to the electromagnetic switch as disclosed in Japanese Patent Application Laid-Open Publication No. 2006-177160, the outer diameter of the solenoid is allowed to be reduced, which leads to reduction of both size and weight of the electromagnetic switch.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

In the accompanying drawings:

FIG. 1 is a cross-sectional view of an electromagnetic switch in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 2A is an axial elevation of a slidable member in accordance with the embodiment of FIG. 1;

FIG. 2B is a half cross-sectional view of the slidable member of FIG. 2A;

FIG. 3 is a cross-sectional view of the electromagnetic switch during active and inactive states in accordance with the embodiment of FIG. 1;

FIG. 4 is a cross-sectional view of a starter in accordance with the present invention;

FIG. 5 is a cross-sectional view of a starter in accordance with the prior art; and

FIG. 6 is a cross-sectional view of another starter in accordance with the prior art.

DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC EMBODIMENTS

The present invention will be described more fully herein after with reference to the accompanying drawings. Like numbers refer to like elements throughout.

First Embodiment

There will now be explained a starter including an electromagnetic switch in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention.

The starter 1, as shown in FIG. 4, includes a motor 2 that receives supplied power to generate a torque, a speed reducer 3 that reduces a rotation speed of the motor 2, a shock absorber (described later) that absorbs excessive shock transmitted from an engine, an output shaft 4 to which the generated torque is transferred from the motor 2 via the speed reducer 3, a pinion 6 disposed along the output shaft 4 integrally with a clutch 5, an electromagnetic switch 8 that drives a shift lever 7 to push the pinion 6 in the anti-plunger direction (to the left as viewed in FIG. 4) and opens and closes a main contact (described later) to thereby interrupt energization current to the motor 2, and a housing 9 in which the motor 2 and the electromagnetic switch 8 are mounted.

The motor 2 is a direct-current (DC) commutator motor including a magnetic-field generator 10 that generates a mag-

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netic field (which may be an electromagnet field although FIG. 4 illustrates a permanent magnet field), an armature 12 having a commutator 11, and brushes 13 disposed on an outer circumference of the commutator 11.

The speed reducer 3 is a well-known planetary reducer including a plurality of planetary gears 14 that receive a rotational force of the armature 12 to rotate and revolve on its own axes. The revolutions of the planetary gears 14 are transmitted to the output shaft 4 via a planetary carrier 15.

The shock absorber includes a friction plate 16 that is rotatably restrained by frictional forces, and is configured such that, when excessive shock is transmitted from the engine to the speed reducer 3, the friction plate 16 slides or rotates against the frictional forces, thereby aborting the shock.

The output shaft 4 is disposed in line with an armature axis 12a of the motor 2, where a first axial side portion of the output shaft 4 is integral with the planetary carrier 15 of the speed reducer 3 and rotatably supported by a center case 18 through a bearing 17 and a second axial side portion of the output shaft 4 is rotatably supported by the housing 9 through a bearing 19.

The clutch 5 is helical-splined onto an outer circumferential periphery of the output shaft 4 and serves as a unidirectional clutch such that the rotation of the output shaft 4 is transmitted to the pinion 6 while torque transfer from the pinion 6 to the output shaft 4 is interrupted. The pinion 6 is integral with the clutch 5 and movably disposed on and along the output shaft 4 together with the clutch 5.

There will now be explained a configuration of the electromagnetic switch 8 with reference to FIG. 1.

In the following, the first axial side and the second axial side respectively refer to the right hand side (terminal bolt side or anti-plunger side) and the left hand side (solenoid case side or plunger side), as viewed in the drawings, in the axial direction of the electromagnetic switch 8 (i.e., the horizontal direction as viewed in the drawings).

The electromagnetic switch 8 includes a resin cover 22 to which two terminal bolts 2, 20, 21 are secured, a pair of fixed contacts 23 electrically connected to the motor circuit via the two terminal bolts 2, 20, 21, a movable contact 24 to electrically connect and disconnect the pair of fixed contacts 23, a solenoid SL to drive the movable contact 24, and others. The solenoid SL includes a metallic solenoid case 25, which also serves as a magnetic circuit, and a solenoid unit (described later) inserted into the solenoid case 25.

The solenoid case 25 is bottomed and cylindrically-shaped with its first axial side portion being open and its second axial side portion including an annular bottom 25a. The solenoid case 25 is secured to the housing 9 through two studs (not shown) secured to the annular bottom 25a of the solenoid case 25 (see FIG. 4).

The solenoid unit includes a coil 26 configured to form an electromagnet through energization, an annular fixed plate 27 disposed adjacent to the coil 26 on the first axial side of the coil 26, a fixed iron core 28 press-fitted into the inner circumferential periphery of the fixed plate 27 so as to be integral with the fixed plate 27, a plunger 29 disposed on the second axial side of the fixed iron core 28 and movable axially on the inner circumferential periphery of the coil 26, a plunger rod 30 secured to the plunger 29, a return spring 31 disposed between the fixed iron core 28 and the plunger 29, and a slidable member 32 (described later), and others.

The coil 26 includes a pull-in coil 26a that generates an electromagnetic force to pull therein the plunger 29, and a hold-in coil 26b that generates an electromagnetic force to hold therein the pulled-in plunger 29. The coil 26 is in a

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double-layer configuration such that the pull-in coil 26a is wound around a resin bobbin 33 and the hold-in coil 26b is wound around the pull-in coil 26a.

The fixed plate 27 may be a stack of a plurality of metallic plates (e.g., iron plates) formed by a ferromagnetic material. A circumferential peripheral portion of the second axial side surface of the fixed plate 27 is in contact with a stepping face of a step formed around the inner circumferential surface of the solenoid case 25. The fixed plate 27 is not limited to such a stack of metallic plates. Alternatively, the fixed plate 27 may be a single metallic plate that is thick in the axial direction.

The fixed iron core 28 is also formed by a ferromagnetic material, such as iron or the like, as in the fixed plate 27, and is magnetized together with the fixed plate 27 through the formation of the electromagnet. The fixed iron core 28 has a through-hole passing therethrough axially in its radial center and having a circular cross-section (hereinafter referred to as a cylindrical bore 28a). The second axial side end face of the fixed iron core 28, facing the plunger 29, includes an annular attaching face adapted to attract the plunger 29 when the fixed iron core 28 is magnetized, and an inner circumferential periphery portion recessed slightly from the annular attaching surface, which is hereinafter referred to as an iron-core recess. The cylindrical bore 28a is opened radially centrally in the iron-core recess on the second axial side of the fixed iron core 28.

The plunger 29 is inserted into an inner circumferential periphery of a cylindrical sleeve 34 disposed inwardly of the bobbin 33. The plunger 29 is movable axially with use of the cylindrical sleeve 34 as a guide surface. The first axial side end face of the plunger 29, facing the fixed iron core 28, includes an annular contact face adapted to be in contact with the attaching face of the fixed iron core 28 when the plunger 29 is attracted by the magnetized iron core 28, and an inner portion recessed slightly from the annular contact surface, which is hereinafter referred to as a plunger recess. On the second axial side of the plunger 29 is opened a bottomed cylindrical bore.

The plunger rod 30 is provided integrally with a flange 30a on the second axial side of the plunger rod 30. The flange 30a is secured to the plunger recess by means of welding or bonding using an adhesive. The plunger rod 30 axially extends through the cylindrical bore 28a, and the anti-plunger side end portion of the plunger rod 30 resides in the contact compartment 35 formed inside the resin cover 22.

The first axial side end of the return spring 31 is supported on an end face of the iron-core recess and the second axial side end of the return spring 31 is supported on an end face of the plunger recess, so that the plunger 29 is biased in the anti-iron-core direction (e.g., the left direction as viewed in the drawings). A joint 36 and a drive spring 37 disposed on an outer circumferential periphery of the joint 36 are inserted in a cylindrical bore formed in the plunger 29, where the joint 36 is adapted to transmit axial movement of the plunger 29 to a shift lever 7.

The joint 36 is provided with a flange 36a on its first axial side such that the flange 36a is pushed against the bottom of the cylindrical bore by reaction force of the drive spring 37. The drive spring 37 is compressed while the plunger 29 is attracted by the magnetized iron core 28, thereby storing a repulsive force for shifting the pinion 6 into the ring gear 38 (see FIG. 4).

An open end portion of the resin cover 22 is inserted into an open end portion of the solenoid case 25 through a sealing member (not shown), such as an O-ring or the like, and attached to the fixed plate 27 through a rubber packing 39. The resin cover 22 is secured to the solenoid case 25 by

crimping the open end portion of the solenoid case 25 over a stepped portion formed on an outer circumferential periphery of the resin cover 22.

Two terminal bolts 20, 21 include a B-terminal bolt 20 electrically connected to a vehicle battery (not shown) through a cable, and a M-terminal bolt 21 connected to a terminal 40a for a motor lead wire 40 (see FIG. 4), where the B-terminal bolt 20 and the M-terminal bolt 21 are secured to the resin cover 22 via their respective washers 41. As shown in FIG. 4, an anti-terminal side end portion of the motor lead wire 40 is retracted inside the motor 2 through a grommet 42 so as to be electrically connected to positive brushes 13.

Bolt heads of the respective bolts 20, 21 are arranged in the contact compartment 35, and secured to their respective fixed contacts 23 by welding or the like.

The movable contact 24 is axially movably supported by an end portion of the plunger rod 30 projecting into the interior of the contact compartment 35 through an insulating member 43 and is biased by a contact pressure spring 44 toward the end portion of the plunger rod 30 (rightward in FIG. 1). A washer 45 is secured to the end portion of the plunger rod 30 so as to prevent the movable contact 24 from being withdrawn from the plunger rod 30.

The main contact set forth above is formed of the pair of fixed contacts 23 and the movable contact 24. In operation, when the movable contact 24 is biased into contact with the pair of fixed contacts 23 under contact pressure of the contact pressure spring 44, then the main contact is closed (i.e., the switch is turned on). Meanwhile, when the movable contact 24 leaves the pair of fixed contacts 23 and electrical connection therebetween is thereby interrupted, then the main contact is opened (i.e., the switch is turned off).

The contact pressure spring 44 is axially disposed on an outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 30, where one end of the contact pressure spring 44 on its anti-movable-contact side is supported by a slidable member 32.

There will now be explained the slidable member 32.

The slidable member 32 may be formed by a resin material having a high level of self-lubricating properties to be cylindrically-shaped and separate from the plunger 29. A resin material having a higher degree of crystallinity, such as polyacetal, polyamide or the like, has a higher level of self-lubricating properties.

The slidable member 32, as shown in FIG. 2B, has an equal outer diameter over the entire length in the axial direction (horizontal direction as viewed in drawings). The outer diameter of the slidable member 32 is slightly less than an inner diameter of the cylindrical bore 28a so that the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32—can be in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a, that is, the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 is axially slidably in contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a.

At least one slit-like vent groove 32b extending in the axial direction is provided on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32. More specifically, as shown in FIG. 2A, six vent grooves 32b are formed equally spaced circumferentially on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32. Each vent groove 32b is not formed along the entire axial length of the slidable member 32, but biased to one side, that is, the second axial side (the left hand side as viewed in drawings) of the slidable member 32, as shown in FIG. 2B. An axial length of each vent groove 32b is greater than an axial length of the cylindrical bore 28a. A first axial side (the right hand side as viewed in drawings) portion of the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member

32, in which no vent grooves 32b are present, is hereinafter referred to as a slidable surface 32c. That is, as shown in FIG. 2B, assuming that the six vent grooves 32b have equal axial length, the slidable surface 32c is defined as axially extending from the first axial side end of each vent groove 32b to the first axial side end face of the slidable member 32. In addition, as shown in FIG. 2B, an inner circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 is stepped axially such that an inner diameter of a portion of the slidable member 32 on the first axial side (right hand side as viewed in drawings) of a stepped face 32a is greater than an inner diameter of a portion of the slidable member 32 on the second axial side (left hand side as viewed in drawings) of the stepped face 32a. The stepped face 32a serves as a spring receiving surface that receives a second axial side end (i.e., an anti-movable-contact-side end) of the contact pressure spring 44 such that the inner diameter of the first axial side portion of the slidable member 32 is slightly greater than an outer diameter of the contact pressure spring 44.

As shown in FIG. 1, the slidable member 32 loosely encompasses the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 30, and a second axial side end of the slidable member 32 is pushed against the flange 30a of the plunger rod 30 by reaction forces of the contact pressure spring 44, which allows the slidable member 32 to be axially and integrally movable with the plunger 29. A second axial side end portion of the contact pressure spring 44 is inserted into the first axial side inner circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32, where an inner diameter of the slidable member 32 on the first axial side is greater than an inner diameter of the slidable member 32 on the second axial side. The inserted end portion of the contact pressure spring 44 is supported on the spring receiving surface 32a formed on the inner circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32.

As shown in FIG. 3, whether the solenoid SL is in its active or inactive state, the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 is at least partially axially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a. The upper half of FIG. 3 shows the electromagnetic switch 8 in its inactive state (in which the solenoid is OFF), and the lower half of FIG. 3 shows the electromagnetic switch 8 in its active state (in which the solenoid is ON). As can be seen from FIG. 3, when the solenoid SL is in its inactive state, the slidable surface 32c of the slidable member 32 is inserted into the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a and the slidable surface 32c of the slidable member 32 is entirely circumferentially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a (at least at a point along the axial direction). Meanwhile, when the solenoid SL is in its active state, each vent groove 32b is axially across the cylindrical bore 28a so that a plunger compartment 46, in which the plunger 29 is axially movable inside the inner circumferential periphery of the coil 29, and the contact compartment 35 are in fluid communication with each other.

There will now be explained the operation of the electromagnetic switch 8.

When the fixed iron core 28 is magnetized upon formation of the electromagnet through energization of the coil 26, then the plunger 29 is magnetically attracted to the fixed iron core 28 while compressing the return spring 31. The axial movement of the plunger 29 toward the fixed iron core 28 causes the pinion 6 to be pushed in the anti-motor direction integrally with the clutch 5 via the shift lever 7. Upon contact of a flank of the pinion 6 with a flank of the ring gear 38, the axial movement of the pinion 6 is stopped.

Meanwhile, once the plunger rod 30 is pushed in the first axial side direction in conjunction with the movement of the plunger 29, the movable contact 24 supported by the plunger rod 30 encounters the pair of fixed contacts 23. When the contact face of the plunger 29 is held in contact with the attaching face of the fixed iron core 28, an axial clearance is formed between the first axial side end face of the slidable member 32 and the insulating member 43. In addition, when the contact face of the plunger 29 is attracted to the attaching face of the fixed iron core 28, a repulsive force is stored in the contact pressure spring 44 as the axial clearance between the first axial side end face of the slidable member 32 and the insulating member 43 is reduced. The movable contact 24 is pushed against the pair of fixed contacts 23 by the repulsive force stored in the contact pressure spring 44, so that the main contact is closed (i.e., the switch is turned on). The slidable member 32 is dimensioned such that the clearance between the first axial side end face of the slidable member 32 and the insulating member 43 is ensured even when the contact face of the plunger 29 is in contact with the attaching face of the fixed iron core 28, which facilitates storing the repulsive force in the contact pressure spring 44.

Once the main contact is turned on, electrical power is supplied from the battery to the motor 2, which leads to generation of a torque in the armature 12. The generated torque is amplified in the speed reducer 3. The amplified torque is transmitted to the output shaft 4, and the output shaft 4 thus rotates. The rotation of the output shaft 4 is transmitted to the pinion 6 via the clutch 5. The pinion 6 thus rotates to be engaged with the ring gear 38 at an engagement-enabled rotational position under influence of a reactive force stored in the drive spring 37. Thus, the torque, originating from the motor 2, amplified in the speed reducer 3 is transmitted from the pinion 6 to the ring gear 38, thereby cranking the engine to be started.

Once the engine has started through cranking, energization of the coil 26 is terminated, which causes the electromagnet to be deactivated. Thereafter, the plunger 29 is pushed back in the anti-fixed-iron-core direction under influence of a reactive force stored in the return spring 31. The pinion 6 is disengaged from the ring gear 38 in conjunction of the movement of the plunger 29. At the same time, the movable contact 24 leaves the pair of fixed contacts 23, so that the main contact is opened (i.e., the switch is turned off). The power supply from the battery to the motor 2 is thereby interrupted.

(Advantages)

In the present embodiment, the electromagnetic switch 8 includes the cylindrically-shaped slidable member 32 that loosely encompasses the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 30. As shown in FIG. 3, whether the solenoid SL is in its active or inactive state, the slidable member 32 is at least partially axially inserted into the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a and the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 is in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a. When the solenoid SL is in its inactive state, the first axial side end of each vent groove 32b is located on the second axial side of and away from the first axial side end of the cylindrical bore 28a, which ensures that the plunger compartment 46 (that is an inner space of the solenoid SL in which the plunger 29 is axially movable) and the contact compartment 35 are not in fluid communication with each other. Particularly, in the present embodiment, the first axial side end of each vent groove 32b is located on the second axial side of and away from the second axial side end of the cylindrical bore 28a, which more reliably ensures that the plunger compartment 46 (an inner space of the solenoid SL in which

the plunger 29 is axially movable) and the contact compartment 35 are not in fluid communication with each other. That is, the sliding surface 32c of the slidable member 32 is inserted axially into the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a and the sliding surface 32c of the slidable member 32 is entirely circumferentially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a over the entire axial length of the cylindrical bore 28a. With this configuration, there is substantially no clearance between the outer circumferential periphery of the sliding surface 32c of the slidable member 32 and the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a, which provides hermeticity between the plunger compartment 46 and the contact compartment 35. This can minimize intrusion of moisture from the plunger compartment 46 into the contact compartment 35.

Meanwhile, when the solenoid SL is in its active state, the sliding surface 32c of the slidable member 32 moves axially out of the cylindrical bore 28a to reach into the contact compartment 35, where the first axial side end of each of the vent grooves 32b provided on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 passes through the first axial side end of the cylindrical bore 28a to enter the contact compartment 35 and the second axial side end of each of the vent grooves 32b stays in the plunger compartment 46 on the second axial side of the cylindrical bore 28a without passing through the second axial side end of the cylindrical bore 28a. As such, each of the vent grooves 32b provided on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 axially extends across the cylindrical bore 28a so that the plunger compartment 46 and the contact compartment 35 is in fluid communication with each other. This can minimize a negative pressure produced in the contact compartment 35 when the plunger 29 is pushed back in the anti-fixed-iron-core direction by the restoring force of the return spring 31 upon transition from the active state to the inactive state of the solenoid SL. In addition, the number of the vent grooves 32b serving as fluid communication channels between the plunger compartment 46 and the contact compartment 35 is limited to six, for instance. Accordingly, there will occur substantially no moisture intrusion into the contact compartment 35, which may prevent generation of ice on the contact faces of the fixed contacts 23 and/or the movable contact 24. Even if a little moisture that has intruded from the plunger compartment 46 into the contact compartment 35 freezes to a contact faces of the fixed contacts 23 and/or the movable contact 24, a film of ice will not grow. This allows a breaking force required to break the ice on the contact faces of the fixed contacts 23 and/or the movable contact 24 to be reduced.

In the present embodiment, the electromagnetic switch 8 as set forth above is configured such that the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger 29 is in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical sleeve 34 and the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 is in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a. The presence of these sliding contact portions of the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger 29 and the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 may cause the plunger 29 and the slidable member 32 to be off-center from each other. To this, the slidable member 32 loosely encompasses the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 30 (that is, there is radial clearance between the inner circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 and the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 30), is separate from the plunger 29, and is not secured to plunger 29. With this configuration, even when the plunger 29 and the slidable member 32 are

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off-center from each other, the slidable member 32 is radially movable with radial play up to the clearance between the slidable member 32 and of the plunger rod 30. This can prevent prying of the plunger 29 and the plunger rod 30 due to the plunger 29 and the slidable member 32 being off-center from each other, thereby preventing increase of sliding resistance.

Since attractive forces of the solenoid SL can be reduced as compared to the electromagnetic switch as disclosed in Japanese Patent Application Laid-Open Publication No. 2006-177160, the outer diameter of the solenoid SL—can be reduced, which leads to reduction of both size and weight of the electromagnetic switch.

In addition, in the present embodiment, the slidable member 32 is urged against the flange 30a of the plunger rod 30 under load of the contact pressure spring 44. This can prevent the slidable member 32 that is separate from the plunger 29 from sliding axially on the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod 30. That is, no additional dedicated component for retaining the slidable member 32 in the axial direction is required to be provided, and the existing contact pressure spring 44 is allowed to be used to urge the slidable member 32 against the flange 30a of the plunger rod 30 to retain the slidable member 32 in the axial direction. This leads to reduction of both size and weight of the electromagnetic switch 8 at a lower expense.

Further, the second axial side (anti-movable-contact side) end portion of the contact pressure spring 44 is inserted into the first axial side inner circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32. The inserted end portion of the contact pressure spring 44 is supported on the spring receiving surface 32a of the slidable member 32. That is, the outer circumferential periphery of the inserted end portion of the contact pressure spring 44 is encompassed by the first axial side portion of the slidable member 32. This can reliably prevent the end of the contact pressure spring 44 from moving out of the spring receiving surface 32a, which enhances reliability in operation of the movable contact 24.

In some alternative embodiments, the contact pressure spring 44 may be arranged in series with the slidable member 32. That is, the inserted end portion of the contact pressure spring 44 is supported not on the spring receiving surface 32a of the slidable member 32, but on the first axial side end face of the slidable member 32. In such embodiments, however, the slidable member 32 and the contact pressure spring 44 don't overlap each other in the radial direction, that is, the contact pressure spring 44 and the slidable member 32 are arranged in axially different positions such that they have no radially overlapping portions over their respective lengths, which causes a mounted position of the contact pressure spring 44 to be greatly shifted toward the contact compartment 35. This may increase an axial length of the contact compartment 35.

In the present embodiment, the electromagnetic switch 8 is configured such that the slidable member 32 and the contact pressure spring 44 overlap each other in the radial direction. This can prevent the contact pressure spring 44 from reaching far into the contact compartment 35. That is, partial insertion of the contact pressure spring 44 into the inner circumferential periphery of the first axial side portion of the slidable member 32 allows the contact pressure spring 44 to be positioned so as to overlap the fixed iron core 28 in the radial direction at least when the solenoid SL is in its inactive state. With this configuration, an axial length of the contact compartment 35 can be reduced as compared to the alternative embodiments where the contact pressure spring 44 may be

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arranged in series with the slidable member 32. This leads to reduction of the entire axial length of the electromagnetic switch 8.

In addition, in the present embodiment, the slidable member 32 is formed by a resin material that is non-magnetic. This can prevent magnetic flux leakage from the slidable member 32, thereby preventing reduction of attractive forces of the solenoid SL. Further, forming the slidable member 32 by using a resin material to thereby reduce weight of the electromagnetic switch 8 can prevent increase of attractive forces of the solenoid SL even in such a configuration that the slidable member 32 moves integrally with the plunger 29. Still further, forming the slidable member 32 by using a resin material having a high level of self-lubricating properties can reduce sliding resistance when the slidable member 32 moves axially within the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a in conjunction with movement of the plunger 29. In particular, as described above, the set forth feature that the sliding resistance can be reduced even in such a configuration that the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger 29 is in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical sleeve 34 and the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 is in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a allows for reduction of attractive forces of the solenoid SL.

(Modifications)

In the above embodiment, the slidable member 32 is formed by a resin material having self-lubricating properties. Alternatively, the slidable member 32 may be formed by any non-magnetic material having self-lubricating properties. Still alternatively, the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member 32 may be subject to surface treatment for providing self-lubricating properties.

In the above embodiment, as shown in FIG. 3, when the electromagnetic switch 8 is in its inactive state, a first axial side end of each vent groove 32b is located axially away from a second axial side end of the cylindrical bore 28a. Alternatively, when the electromagnetic switch 8 is in its inactive state, the first axial side end of each vent groove 32b may be located axially between the first and second axial side ends of the cylindrical bore 28a. Although an axial sealing length, i.e., an axial length of a portion of the slidable surface 32c in contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore 28a is reduced as compared to the axial sealing length in the above embodiment, disconnection between the contact compartment 35 and the plunger compartment 46 may be ensured during the inactive state of the electromagnetic switch 8.

Many modifications and other embodiments of the invention will come to mind to one skilled in the art to which this invention pertains having the benefit of the teachings presented in the foregoing descriptions and the associated drawings. Therefore, it is to be understood that the invention is not to be limited to the specific embodiments disclosed and that modifications and other embodiments are intended to be included within the scope of the appended claims. Although specific terms are employed herein, they are used in a generic and descriptive sense only and not for purposes of limitation.

What is claimed is:

1. An electromagnetic switch for a starter, comprising:
 - a main contact provided on a motor circuit for the starter and configured to interrupt energization current to a motor; and
 - a solenoid configured to open and close the main contact in response to ON/OFF operation of an electromagnet,

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the solenoid comprising

- a coil configured to form the electromagnet through energization,
- a plunger movable axially on an inner circumferential periphery of the coil,
- a fixed iron core disposed on an axial side of the plunger and having a cylindrical bore that is a through-hole passing through the fixed iron core axially in its radial center, the fixed iron core being configured to be magnetized by the electromagnet, and
- a plunger rod extending axially through an inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore and having an axial plunger side end portion secured to the plunger so as to be movable integrally with the plunger,

wherein the main contact comprises

- a pair of fixed contacts disposed in a contact compartment formed on an axial anti-plunger side of the fixed iron core, the pair of fixed contacts being electrically connected to the motor circuit, and
- a movable contact attached to an axial anti-plunger side end portion of the plunger rod passing through the cylindrical bore and projecting into the contact compartment, the movable contact being axially movable integrally with the plunger so as to electrically connect and disconnect the pair of fixed contacts, thereby turning on and off the motor circuit,

wherein the electromagnetic switch further comprises a cylindrical slidable member that is separate from the plunger, loosely encompasses an outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod, and is axially movable integrally with the plunger, the slidable member being at least partially axially inserted into the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore whether the solenoid is in its active or inactive state,

the slidable member having a sliding surface that is a ring-shaped portion of an outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member such that, when the solenoid is in its inactive state, the sliding surface is entirely circumferentially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore, and when the solenoid is in its active state, the sliding surface entirely resides in the contact compartment, and

the slidable member further having an elongated vent groove axially extending on a portion of the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member other than the sliding surface, an axial length of the vent groove being greater than an axial length of the cylindrical bore, such that, when the solenoid is in its active state, a plunger compartment, in which the plunger is axially movable inside the inner circumferential periphery of the coil, and the contact compartment are in fluid communication with each other via the vent groove.

2. The electromagnetic switch of claim 1, further comprising:

- a contact pressure spring disposed on the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod, the contact pressure spring being configured to urge the movable contact against the pair of fixed contacts to be in contact therewith when the main contact is closed,

wherein the slidable member includes a spring receiving surface adapted to support an axial plunger side end portion of the contact pressure spring such that the slidable member is retained on the axial plunger side of the plunger rod under load of the contact pressure spring.

3. The electromagnetic switch of claim 1, wherein the slidable member is formed by a non-magnetic material.

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4. The electromagnetic switch of claim 1, wherein the slidable member is formed by a material having self-lubricating properties.

5. The electromagnetic switch of claim 1, wherein the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member is subject to surface treatment for providing self-lubricating properties.

6. An electromagnetic switch for a starter comprising: a main contact provided on a motor circuit for the starter and configured to interrupt energization current to a motor;

a solenoid configured to open and close the main contact in response to ON/OFF operation of an electromagnet, the solenoid comprising

- a coil configured to form the electromagnet through energization,
- a plunger movable axially on an inner circumferential periphery of the coil,
- a fixed iron core disposed on an axial side of the plunger and having a cylindrical bore that is a through-hole passing through the fixed iron core axially in its radial center, the fixed iron core being configured to be magnetized by the electromagnet, and
- a plunger rod extending axially through an inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore and having an axial plunger side end portion secured to the plunger so as to be movable integrally with the plunger, the plunger rod comprising a flange on its axial plunger side, the flange being secured to the plunger,

wherein the main contact comprises

- a pair of fixed contacts disposed in a contact compartment formed on an axial anti-plunger side of the fixed iron core, the pair of fixed contacts being electrically connected to the motor circuit, and
- a movable contact attached to an axial anti-plunger side end portion of the plunger rod passing through the cylindrical bore and projecting into the contact compartment, the movable contact being axially movable integrally with the plunger so as to electrically connect and disconnect the pair of fixed contacts, thereby turning on and off the motor circuit,

wherein the electromagnetic switch further comprises a cylindrical slidable member that is separate from the plunger, loosely encompasses an outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod, and is axially movable integrally with the plunger, the slidable member being at least partially axially inserted into the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore whether the solenoid is in its active or inactive state,

the slidable member having a sliding surface that is a portion of an outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member such that, when the solenoid is in its inactive state, the sliding surface is entirely circumferentially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential periphery of the cylindrical bore, and

the slidable member further having a vent groove axially extending on the outer circumferential periphery of the slidable member such that, when the solenoid is in its active state, a plunger compartment, in which the plunger is axially movable inside the inner circumferential periphery of the coil, and the contact compartment are in fluid communication with each other via the vent groove; and

a contact pressure spring disposed on the outer circumferential periphery of the plunger rod, the contact pressure spring being configured to urge the movable contact

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against the pair of fixed contacts to be in contact there-
with when the main contact is closed,
wherein the slidable member includes a spring receiving
surface adapted to support an axial plunger side end
portion of the contact pressure spring such that the slid-
able member is retained on the axial plunger side of the
plunger rod under load of the contact pressure spring,
and
the slidable member is urged against the flange of the
plunger rod under load of the contact pressure spring so
that an axial plunger side end face of the slidable mem-
ber is in contact with the flange of the plunger rod.
7. The electromagnetic switch of claim 6, wherein
an inner circumferential periphery of the slidable member
includes an axially stepped face serving as the spring
receiving surface,
an inner diameter of the slidable member on an axial anti-
plunger side of the stepped face is greater than an inner
diameter of the slidable member on an axial plunger side
of the stepped face, whereby at least the axial plunger
side end portion of the contact pressure spring is inserted
into the inner circumferential periphery of the slidable
member on the axial anti-plunger side of the stepped
face and the inserted end portion of the contact pressure
spring is supported on the spring receiving surface of the
slidable member.
8. The electromagnetic switch of claim 7, wherein
the contact pressure spring is positioned on the outer cir-
cumferential periphery of the plunger rod so as to over-
lap the fixed iron core in a radial direction at least when
the solenoid is in its inactive state.
9. An electromagnetic switch for a starter comprising:
a main contact provided on a motor circuit for the starter
and configured to interrupt energization current to a
motor;
a solenoid configured to open and close the main contact in
response to ON/OFF operation of an electromagnet,
the solenoid comprising
a coil configured to form the electromagnet through
energization,
a plunger movable axially on an inner circumferential
periphery of the coil,
a fixed iron core disposed on an axial side of the plunger
and having a cylindrical bore that is a through-hole
passing through the fixed iron core axially in its radial
center, the fixed iron core being configured to be
magnetized by the electromagnet, and
a plunger rod extending axially through an inner circum-
ferential periphery of the cylindrical bore and having
an axial plunger side end portion secured to the
plunger so as to be movable integrally with the
plunger,
wherein the main contact comprises
a pair of fixed contacts disposed in a contact compart-
ment formed on an axial anti-plunger side of the fixed
iron core, the pair of fixed contacts being electrically
connected to the motor circuit, and

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a movable contact attached to an axial anti-plunger side
end portion of the plunger rod passing through the
cylindrical bore and projecting into the contact com-
partment, the movable contact being axially movable
integrally with the plunger so as to electrically con-
nect and disconnect the pair of fixed contacts, thereby
turning on and off the motor circuit,
wherein the electromagnetic switch further comprises a
cylindrical slidable member that is separate from the
plunger, loosely encompasses an outer circumferential
periphery of the plunger rod, and is axially movable
integrally with the plunger, the slidable member being at
least partially axially inserted into the inner circumfer-
ential periphery of the cylindrical bore whether the sole-
noid is in its active or inactive state,
the slidable member having a sliding surface that is a
portion of an outer circumferential periphery of the slid-
able member such that, when the solenoid is in its inac-
tive state, the sliding surface is entirely circumferen-
tially in sliding contact with the inner circumferential
periphery of the cylindrical bore, and
the slidable member further having a vent groove axially
extending on the outer circumferential periphery of the
slidable member such that, when the solenoid is in its
active state, a plunger compartment, in which the
plunger is axially movable inside the inner circumferen-
tial periphery of the coil, and the contact compartment
are in fluid communication with each other via the vent
groove; and
a contact pressure spring disposed on the outer circumfer-
ential periphery of the plunger rod, the contact pressure
spring being configured to urge the movable contact
against the pair of fixed contacts to be in contact there-
with when the main contact is closed,
wherein the slidable member includes a spring receiving
surface adapted to support an axial plunger side end
portion of the contact pressure spring such that the slid-
able member is retained on the axial plunger side of the
plunger rod under load of the contact pressure spring,
an inner circumferential periphery of the slidable member
includes an axially stepped face serving as the spring
receiving surface, and
an inner diameter of the slidable member on an axial anti-
plunger side of the stepped face is greater than an inner
diameter of the slidable member on an axial plunger side
of the stepped face, whereby at least the axial plunger
side end portion of the contact pressure spring is inserted
into the inner circumferential periphery of the slidable
member on the axial anti-plunger side of the stepped
face and the inserted end portion of the contact pressure
spring is supported on the spring receiving surface of the
slidable member.
10. The electromagnetic switch of claim 9, wherein
the contact pressure spring is positioned on the outer cir-
cumferential periphery of the plunger rod so as to over-
lap the fixed iron core in a radial direction at least when
the solenoid is in its inactive state.

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